

## **Mercury Rule Hearing: Teaching the Unthinkable**

*By Christopher Coleman*

*March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004*

Hello, my name is Chris Coleman and I am here as a representative of the Chewonki Foundation. We are a non-profit center for environmental education located in Wiscasset, ME. Personally, I am the Assistant Director of our Travelling Natural History Programs. To put it simply: I am a teacher. In the course of a year I teach thousands of elementary school children throughout the state of Maine about Owls, Hawks, reptiles, amphibians, waste management, global warming, predators, prey, food chains, mammals, trees etc. If its going on outside we have a lesson that will teach you about it. In just about every lesson I teach, there is a time when I explain the problems that the particular subject of that lesson faces, whether it be plant or animal. I teach with the understanding that awareness leads to action. To each problem I offer a solution. Since the majority of these problems are related to humans, the solutions deal with things students can do to fix them i.e. picking up trash on the beach, not throwing apple cores out car windows, buying things in the grocery store that produce less waste etc. I feel that it is important that children understand they are not helpless in the grand scheme of things just because they are kids.

I pride myself in my ability as an educator to present issues to students in a non-bias, "middle of the road" sort of way. They deserve to hear both sides of the issue. I think it is unfair to take advantage of such a malleable mind. Children need to be given the facts, and then, from their it is truly an amazing thing to watch as they go through a very intense deductive process which almost always culminates in the simple but entirely justified question, "Why?" Gone are the days when as adults we can get away with the answer, "Because that's just the way it is." They have matured far too much to accept such a thoughtless answer. Even at ten years of age they need some "hard science" to reinforce every concept within their own environment.

Now I have a new problem to teach: mercury contamination. I know the problem is not new to most of us here, but upon researching the topic I have decided that the issue now warrants a great deal of awareness among children in order to create the action I

spoke of earlier. After all, they are the ones that will be forced to deal with this issue as it becomes more and more of a problem. First I give them the "hard science":

- Mercury is a highly toxic chemical with effects on the central nervous system comparable to those of lead, especially for unborn fetuses, very young children whose brains are still developing, and piscivorous animal.
- 45 states have issued freshwater fish consumption advisories.
- Loons of Maine in high-risk mercury situations have been observed, spending far less time sitting on their eggs in the nest, foraging for food, and increased time brooding and resting.
- High mercury levels are being passed on to Loon chicks
- 4.9 million women of childbearing age in the U.S. -- that's 8 percent -- have mercury levels in their blood that are unsafe. (Center for Disease Control)
- Two years ago, EPA scientists concluded that 90 percent reduction in mercury output from coal fired power plants are possible using existing technologies.
- The list goes on, and on, and on.

Here is my dilemma though. What do I offer as a solution to kids? What can they do? Maybe it's a problem better left for adults to handle. And then they'll ask, "What are the adults doing about all of the mercury that goes into our water?" Now, thankfully I have an answer. Based on recent decisions made by our government, I can honestly say to them, "Absolutely nothing."

What I fear the most though are the questions students ask that they have no idea are even related to mercury, like, "Where are all the loons that used to live on my lake? How come that bald eagle doesn't come back to its nest anymore? I used to hear the shrill cries of an osprey every time my family visited that island. Now everything is so quiet. Where did the Osprey go?" Do I then explain to them that a deadly neurotoxin called methylmercury is slowly killing off these birds and it will only get worse as they grow older.

Don't make me answer those questions. I shouldn't have to answer them. Those answers should come from the people who have created and perpetuate the ill effects of mercury contamination. I always have such high hopes for children, for the things they are capable of now and in the future, but why do we constantly stack the deck against them. It is time to right the wrongs of my generation, your generation, and generations

before us so that the children of today will be able to swim in their lakes, eat their fish, and enjoy the wildlife within their forests. I fear we as adults have created so many problems for them to deal with, so why not remedy this situation before it becomes catastrophic. My name is Chris Coleman. I am a teacher. I came here today to speak for the children of Maine.